

Brendan told Jack that Holly was having to work twice as hard to win at competitions, because a new girl had moved into their area who was nearly as good as Holly.

Jack tried his best not to annoy Holly when she came to spend the weekend, but it was hard to know what would set her off. When Jack had a cold, she shouted at him for sniffing during her favorite TV program. When Brendan told her off, Holly stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Brendan ran after her. After sitting on his own for a bit, Jack decided to go upstairs to his bedroom. He curled up on his bed with DP, who silently agreed that it wasn't Jack's fault he'd sniffed, and that Holly had been horrible.

It was nearly Christmas. School broke up. Jack was excited because he'd asked for a new bike and so had his best friend, Rory. There was a good paved bit of play-park near Rory's house and he and Jack were planning to race their new bikes there.

When Mum took out the box of Christmas decorations that year, she showed Brendan the angel that had always sat on top of their family tree. Jack had made it when he was in nursery school. The angel's body was a toilet roll, its wings were made of card with glitter glued on, and it had a beard made of brown wool.

"Angels don't have beards!" said Holly scornfully, when she saw Jack's creation on top of the tree. Mum and Brendan were in the kitchen when Holly said this. "Why would anyone put an old toilet roll on a Christmas tree? My mum wouldn't put up stuff I'd made when I was a *baby*. She'd know I'd be embarrassed."

Jack suddenly remembered how Dad always used to say "and now for the finishing touch," and lift Jack up so he could put the toilet roll angel on the tree, last of all. For a moment, Jack wanted his dad to come home so badly it gave him a pain in his chest.

This was the last time Jack was going to see Holly before Christmas, because Holly's mum was taking her away to visit relatives abroad. Jack was glad. If he couldn't have Dad, at least he'd have Mum, Brendan, Gran, Grandpa, and Toby-the-dog in a good mood, because Holly wouldn't be slamming doors and forcing the grown-ups to try and keep her happy.

The day before Christmas Eve, Gran came over to look after Jack, because Mum and Brendan were both at work. It had started to snow. Flakes drifted past the window while Jack watched a Christmas movie with DP on his lap. The Christmas tree lights were twinkling in the corner, Toby-the-dog was asleep on the floor, and Jack felt relaxed and happy. He didn't notice the taxi rolling up outside the house.

The doorbell rang. Toby-the-dog jumped up and started barking. Jack heard Gran open the front door and then her exclamation of surprise.

"Holly! What are you doing here?"

Jack looked round in time to see Holly dragging a suitcase into the hall. She looked furious and her cheeks were tearstained.

"I thought you'd be on the plane by now!" said Gran.

"I'm not going!" said Holly. "I want to see Dad!"

"But he's at work, dear," said Gran, bewildered. "Where's your mum?"

Gran peered out into the snowy front garden, but there was nobody there. Holly had come to their house alone.

"I'm not going with her!" shouted Holly, and she stomped toward the stairs, dragging her heavy suitcase with her, and refused to answer any more of Gran's questions.

Gran phoned Brendan, who left work early, and then Holly's mum arrived. Her name was Natalia. Jack had never met her before. He went and hid in his bedroom, but he could still hear what everyone was shouting. It seemed Holly had lost a big gymnastics competition, and

her mum had told her it was because she kept missing practices, and Holly had gotten very angry and run away from her mum at the airport.

"I suppose *you* encouraged this!" he heard Natalia shouting at Brendan.

Natalia finally left the house, crying. Holly had refused to go with her, insisting that she wanted to spend Christmas with her dad. Jack was now very hungry, but he didn't want to go downstairs until Mum was there.

By the time Mum came home, Jack was fast asleep on his bed, DP clutched in his hand.



CHRISTMAS EVE

Jack woke up on Christmas Eve holding DP as usual. For a few moments he lay quite still, thinking about the new bike he'd be getting the next day and feeling excited. He knew Mum would have already left for work, and that she had to work late this evening, but she had all of Christmas Day and Boxing Day off.

Then he remembered that Holly was still here. He'd only just had time to wonder what she'd find to get angry about today when there was an enormous crash from downstairs and Toby-the-dog started barking. Jack got up and went to see what had happened.

When he entered the sitting room, he saw the Christmas tree lying on the floor beside an overturned chair. Gran was trying to catch Toby-the-

dog, who was ferreting through the decorations in search of all the chocolate ones he shouldn't eat.

"I was only trying to put my decoration on the tree!" Holly was saying, half-sorry, half-defiant. She was holding an ornament she'd made at school and which she'd been attempting to hang near the top. Apparently, she'd lost her balance, seized the tree, and pulled it right over.

"It's all right, dear," said Gran. "No harm done."

But there *was* harm done. When all the baubles that weren't broken were put back on the tree, they realized that the toilet roll angel was missing. Finally, Grandpa found a few wet bits of cardboard and wool: Toby-the-dog had torn the angel apart.

"That blasted dog!" said Grandpa.

Jack knew Mum would be really upset. She loved his angel. Nobody even told Holly off.

"I tell you what we'll do," said Gran, trying to keep things cheerful. "We'll all drive into town and choose a new angel!"

Holly could hardly refuse, seeing as it was her fault the angel had been eaten, but Jack could tell she really didn't want to go. She sat scowling on the sofa and texting her friends. When Jack went upstairs to put on his coat, he sneaked DP into his pocket. He felt the need for comfort just now.



THE NEW ANGEL

Holly sat hunched up beside Jack in the back seat of the car, still texting all the way into town.

“Look at all this snow!” said Gran cheerfully as white flecks began to build up on the windscreen and Grandpa switched on the wipers. “Wouldn’t a white Christmas be lovely?”

Neither Jack nor Holly said anything.

The pavements in town were covered in brown slush. Christmas music was playing in all the shops and there was a chestnut seller on the corner. Jack held Gran’s hand, with his other in his pocket, keeping hold of DP. Crowds bustled around them, all doing last-minute shopping.

They went into a busy department store. There weren't many Christmas decorations left and they looked higgledy-piggledy because shoppers were picking them up and putting them down in a hurry.

"Here's a lovely angel," said Gran, grabbing the first one she saw.

Jack didn't like the angel at all. He thought she was too fancy for their tree. She wore a gaudy purple dress trimmed with gold braid and had large plastic gold wings. Jack didn't think Mum would like her, either. She'd loved his toilet roll angel with the woolly beard.

"What do you think of her, Holly?" Gran asked, but Holly shrugged rudely and kept looking at her phone.

Gran didn't ask Jack. She led them to the checkout desk and bought the angel. Then they headed back to the car park through the cold slush and the bustling crowds.

On the way back home in the car, Holly said, "I feel sick."

"Maybe you should stop texting while we're in the car, dear," said Gran.

Holly rolled her eyes and pressed the button to lower the window. An icy blast filled the back of the car and flecks of snow swept inside.

"I'm cold," said Jack.

"I need fresh air," snapped Holly.

They reached the motorway. Jack was now shivering. He felt miserable and angry. Why did Holly always have to have things her way?

"Gran, I'm cold."

"Holly, close the window a bit, please," said Gran.

Holly put the window up a fraction. Sleet and snow continued to blow into the car.

"It's still wide open," said Jack.

Holly stuck out her lower lip, making a baby face, and pointed at DP, whom Jack had pulled out of his pocket. Grandpa saw her do it in his rearview mirror.

"Enough of that, miss," he said. "Wind up the window, please."

Holly scowled and put the window up another bit. Then she turned to Jack, stuck out her bottom lip again, and pretended to be a baby rubbing tears from its eyes.

Jack didn't believe Holly really felt sick. She just wanted to be nasty. She was ruining Christmas Eve and she'd probably ruin Christmas Day, too, snapping at Jack and making herself the center of attention. She kept silently taunting him with the baby face. The hard, tight ball of anger in Jack's tummy burned suddenly red hot.

"Loser," he whispered.

Holly stopped making the baby face at once.

"Shut up," she growled.

Jack didn't care that he'd made her even angrier. She was ruining everything. She was rude to Mum, Gran, and Grandpa. She'd come to stay when he didn't want her. It was all her fault Toby-the-dog had eaten his bearded angel. He wanted to punish her for spoiling Christmas and he knew exactly how to do it. There was nothing Holly hated in the world more than losing.

"Loser," said Jack, more loudly.

"Jack," said Grandpa sharply from the driver's seat, "I hope you didn't just say what I think you said."

Jack didn't answer. He could tell that Holly was on the verge of tears now, and he was glad. He was sick of her bullying. He didn't care about keeping the peace. He'd had no dinner last night because of Holly. He was tired of having to tiptoe around her.

She suddenly pressed the window button, lowering it all the way to the bottom again, so that an icy gale blew through the car.

"Holly—" began Gran.

"I'm going to be sick!" said Holly. Jack knew she was doing it in revenge. So he did something that he'd seen people do at school: they used their thumbs and forefingers to make an L shape and held it up to their foreheads. The "L" stood for "loser."

He made the L shape, held it up, and glared at Holly.

So fast that he had no hope of stopping her, Holly leaned forward, seized DP out of Jack's lap, and threw him out of the open window. For a brief second, Jack saw DP frozen against the steely sky, his little trotters spread-eagled; then he was whipped away out of sight.



LOST

Jack yelled so loudly that Grandpa swerved dangerously. “She threw DP out of the window!” bellowed Jack. *“She threw DP out of the window!”*

But Grandpa couldn’t stop in the middle of the motorway. They drove on for what seemed like ages before he was able to pull over. Holly’s arms were folded, her face was cold and set. She didn’t seem to care at all about what she’d done. Once they’d stopped, Grandpa got out of the car, and ran back the way they’d come, disappearing into the snow, in the hope of rescuing DP.

“Grandpa will find him,” said Gran, but Jack didn’t believe her. He tried to get out of the car to look for DP himself, but Gran made him

stay inside. Jack began to yell and cry. He had to have DP back. DP was the only one in the whole world who knew everything, who always cared and never changed. He needed DP, he *had* to have him, and DP needed Jack, because only the two of them understood each other, and now DP was lying lost on the motorway, believing Jack had left him forever. Jack kicked the back of the driver's seat, still yelling in rage, and tried to punch Holly.

"Jack!" said Gran, shocked. "Calm down! We'll find DP!"

A police car drew up and parked behind them. The policeman got out and came to ask Gran why they'd stopped. Gran explained and the police went away again. Still Grandpa didn't come back. Cars whizzed past, more snow fell, and Jack looked out of the back window, sobbing. He couldn't get rid of the image of DP flying out of the car window, small and floppy and frightened as he cartwheeled away through the air. Grandpa had to find him. He *had* to.

But when Grandpa came back to the car, he gave a little shake of the head as he looked into Gran's eyes, then turned to Jack and said, "I'm sorry, lad. I think he's gone."

After that, Jack was shouting and crying too loudly to hear anything anyone said to him. He couldn't stand feeling the car bearing him away from the place where DP was lying, lost and bewildered and wondering why Jack wasn't coming back for him. They drove home with Jack pummeling his fists against the door of the car, begging to be let out so that he could go back and find DP.

When he got home, Jack tried to run back up the street toward the motorway. Grandpa grabbed him and half dragged, half carried him into the house. Once inside, Jack ran up to his bedroom and began to throw things. He took all the toys he could *reach* from their shelves and threw them across the room. He ripped *posters* down from his walls. He pulled out drawers. He even overturned his desk.

Gran came upstairs.

"Jack, stop it! STOP IT! You're usually such a good little boy!"

In answer, Jack picked up his wastepaper bin and threw it at the window. He'd hoped the glass would break, but it didn't.

"That's enough, young man!" roared Grandpa, appearing in the doorway behind Gran. "You just calm down, right now!"

There wasn't much left to throw or break, so instead Jack launched himself facedown on his bed and refused to move or speak. At last, Gran and Grandpa left him alone.

All Jack's life, when he'd gone to bed, he'd reached for DP. He seemed to feel DP right now: his limp little body, his bean-filled belly, his worn trotters, so good for wiping away tears. He could even smell DP's slightly grubby homelike whiff.

"I'll find you, DP," Jack vowed into his tear-soaked pillow. "I'll come back when they're all asleep."

After an hour, when Jack had cried all he could cry, he lay on his bed in his wrecked room and listened to the sounds of the house around him. He kept hoping to hear the front door open. If Gran phoned Mum at work and told her what had happened, she'd surely come home early. Mum understood how important DP was. She'd help him look. But the front door didn't open.

Grandpa came and knocked on Jack's bedroom door at one o'clock and asked him if he wanted lunch. Jack shouted no. A little while later, Gran came to his door and asked him if he wanted to come and see the new angel on top of the tree. Jack shouted no even louder. Then he heard the front door open and close. For one happy moment, he thought Mum had come home early, just as he'd hoped, but instead, he heard somebody walking away down the snowy front path. He didn't

care who it was, or why they were going. He no longer cared about Christmas. All he cared about was DP.



THE CHRISTMAS PIG

It was nearly teatime when he heard the garden gate creak and footsteps coming back up the path. Hoping it was Mum, he jumped up and looked out of the window, but it was only Grandpa and Holly.

Not long afterward, there was another knock on Jack's bedroom door and it opened.

"Jack," said Grandpa. "Holly's got something she'd like to give you."

Holly's face was puffy and tearstained. Jack sat up on his bed, staring at the brown paper bag in Holly's hand. He could think of only one thing that could make up for what she'd done. They must have gone back to the motorway to look for DP. They must have found him.

For the space of a heartbeat, Jack thought that was exactly what they'd done, because when Holly put her hand in the bag, he heard the rattle of belly beans.

Then hope fled. Holly pulled out a brand-new pig. It was the same size as DP, and made of the same toweling material, but it was plump and smug looking, with sleek salmon-pink skin and shiny black eyes that looked like tiny beetles.

"He's just the same, look," said Grandpa. "Holly's very sorry, Jack. She bought it out of her pocket money for you."

"I *am* sorry, Jack," whispered Holly. "*Really, really sorry.*"

When Jack didn't answer, Grandpa said in a falsely jolly voice, "He's a Christmas Pig. Aren't you, eh?" He took the pig from Holly and made it wave a plump trotter at Jack. "See, Jack? He likes you. Now, why don't you come downstairs with us, eh? We'll have some tea and watch a movie. We'll hang up our stockings together. And don't forget your new bike, Jack! Father Christmas is probably loading it onto his sleigh right now! Come on, lad. Come downstairs, bring the Christmas Pig, and we'll all be friends."

Jack got slowly off the bed and held out a hand for the Christmas Pig. He felt, as Jack had expected, horrible: slippery smooth instead of rough and worn. Jack hated his shiny black eyes and perky pink ears, which ought to be lopsided and gray.

"There's a good boy," said Grandpa.

At these words, Jack went into his worst frenzy yet. They thought a brand-new pig could be the same as DP, which showed how little they

understood. DP was the only DP in the world and this new pig was nothing . . . *nothing*. Jack threw the Christmas Pig on the floor and stamped on him, then he picked him up, held him by a trotter, and smashed him again and again into the wardrobe, finally grabbing his head and trying to pull it off.

“Jack!” shouted Grandpa. “That’s enough, Jack!”

Holly ran out of the bedroom. Jack chucked the Christmas Pig across the room at the wardrobe, then threw himself back onto the bed, yelling and punching his pillow. Nothing Grandpa said or did would persuade him to come downstairs. He didn’t care about hanging up his stocking. He didn’t want to be a good boy. He didn’t want a new bike. The only thing in the world he wanted was DP.

Much, much later, he heard a commotion downstairs. From what Jack overheard, Toby-the-dog had dragged over the tree again in search of the last bits of chocolate and he appeared to have chewed up the new angel, too. Jack was glad. If he hadn’t been so sad and angry, he’d have laughed. He wished he could rip up the whole of Christmas, and then perhaps they’d all understand how he felt knowing DP was lying lost on a motorway.

Gran came upstairs and made him put on his pajamas before bed. Jack only did it so she wouldn’t realize what he was planning. He got into bed in the room he’d done his best to destroy, with the posters still screwed up on the floor, the drawers still out of the desk, and the Christmas Pig lying in a heap at the foot of the wardrobe, and pretended he was going to go to sleep. At last, Gran left.

The snow swirled against the blackening sky outside his window while Jack waited for the house to fall completely silent. Normally, he’d be very excited. He’d have hung up his stocking with Mum and left out a carrot for Rudolph—but not this Christmas Eve. To be excited about

any of that was to betray DP, who was more important than the whole of Christmas put together.

Once everyone fell asleep, Jack was going to get up again, get dressed, sneak out of the house, return to the motorway, and find his oldest friend.

THE NIGHT FOR MIRACLES AND LOST CAUSES

Jack knew that he must have fallen asleep because he woke in pitch darkness. People were talking in his room. He supposed Gran and Grandpa had come to see whether he was all right. He kept his eyes shut, because he wanted them to think he was still sleeping.

"It's never been done," said a worried voice. "I'm not sure it's possible."

"Of course it's possible," said a second voice. "It all depends on the boy, on whether he's brave enough."

"He's very brave, but it's too dangerous," said a third voice, which was old and croaky. "I've been there, many times. I know what I'm talking about."

"I've been there, too," a fourth voice. "Most of us have been there at one time or another."

"I haven't," said a fifth voice, which was slow and deep.

"Well, of course *you* haven't," said the first voice. "You're too big. I'm talking about us little Things."

None of these people sounded familiar. Jack was starting to feel scared. Who were they? He didn't want to open his eyes in case the strangers saw that he was awake.

"If it's going to be done, it's got to be done tonight," said the second voice. "I'm waking him up."

At this, a whole chorus of voices murmured their disapproval, but Jack was more worried about the strange sensation that something was climbing up the side of his bed. He could feel it tugging at his duvet: it was small, like a kitten. He could also hear the rattling of . . . belly beans. Then, before he could make up his mind what to do, something poked his face.

Terrified, Jack slapped the poking creature away. He heard a crunching noise as it hit the wardrobe. The deep, slow voice said, "Ouch," and the second voice said, "I've had just about enough of being hit!"

Jack groped for the switch on his lamp and turned it on. Blinking, he looked around his room. There was nobody there. The Christmas Pig was lying at the foot of the wardrobe.

Jack knew in his heart that he'd just hit the Christmas Pig. Even so, he wasn't ready to see the Christmas Pig *get* to his feet, put his trotters on

his hips, and say, "If you hit me one more time, you horrible boy, I won't help you."

Jack was so shocked and scared he couldn't move. He remembered Mum once telling him that the way to find out whether you're dreaming is to pinch yourself. He tried it on his own leg. It hurt.

"You can talk!" whispered Jack.

"Clever, aren't you?" said the Christmas Pig, crossly.

"Jack is clever," said the croaky voice, which was coming from a battered old Matchbox car that had once belonged to Jack's dad. His hood was moving up and down as he talked, and his headlights had turned into eyes. "Stop being nasty to him. He's been through a lot of trouble you don't know about."

"I've been through trouble, too," said the Christmas Pig. "In case you've forgotten, he tried to pull my head off. And I'm offering to help him—on certain conditions, of course."

As if it wasn't strange enough to watch a cuddly pig and a toy car talking to each other, Jack now realized that lots of the other objects in the room had grown eyes and mouths, just like the car. The wardrobe had big brown eyes where there'd been knots of wood, and a mouth instead of a keyhole. His wastepaper basket had two little eyes on tin stalks, a bit like a snail's. Some of the Things had even sprouted arms: spindly metal ones on his bin, and floppy woolly ones on his rug. It was *sort of* exciting, but mostly terrifying.

"You've got to warn him how dangerous it will be," the Matchbox car was telling the Christmas Pig. "Otherwise he can't know what he's getting into."

There was a murmur of agreement from all the Things in the room.

"I didn't know," said Jack, finding his voice at last. "I didn't know Things could . . . talk."

What he really meant to say was: I didn't know you could *feel*. He'd been very rough with these Things earlier and none more so than the Christmas Pig.

"We can only talk in the Land of the Living tonight, because it's a special night," said the Christmas Pig. "You know what night it is, don't you?"

"Christmas Eve," said Jack.

"Exactly," said the Christmas Pig. "And that means there's a chance—just for one night, we couldn't do it at any other time—that we can get your pig back."

"I know," said Jack, throwing back his duvet, which was one of the few things in the room that hadn't sprouted eyes and wasn't talking. "I'm going to the motorway."

"That won't work," said the Christmas Pig. "DP's in the Land of the Lost now and if you want to save him, you'll have to go and find him there and come home together."

"There's no such place as the Land of the Lost," said Jack scornfully. "You're making that up."

At that, most of the Things in his room began to talk at once: the box of tissues, both his slippers, and even the lampshade he'd brought to the new house from his old bedroom. It was extremely confusing and scary, and Jack didn't know whether he was more frightened of all these noisy Things waking up Gran and Grandpa, who'd stop him going outside to find DP, or of the Things themselves.

"I'll explain!" croaked the Matchbox car, and even though he was one of the smallest Things in the room, all the other Things fell silent, perhaps because he was one of the oldest. The car moved forward on his rusty wheels and spoke directly to Jack.

"The Land of the Lost is where Things go when you lose them," he said. "It's a strange and terrible place, governed by its own peculiar laws. I've been there many times, because you and your dad lost me so often."

"Sorry," said Jack nervously. It was true that he'd often forgotten where in the garden he had last played with the little car, which was why he was chipped and rusty.

"You always found me in the end," said the car, "and so, thank goodness, the Loser never got me."

"The who?" asked Jack.

"The Loser," the car repeated. "He rules the Land of the Lost. He's the reason Things fall out of pockets when you thought they were secure. He's the one who befuddles your mind so that you forget where you last put your pen. The Loser would like to suck every single Thing that belongs to humans down into his kingdom forever. He hates the living and he hates their Things, which he tortures and eats."

"The Loser's going to eat DP?" whispered Jack in terror.

"Not as long as DP abides by the laws of the Land of the Lost," said the car. "It's those who defy the law that the Loser's allowed to catch and eat. Unfortunately, the Loser makes the laws, and he sometimes cheats."

"I've got to rescue DP!" said Jack at once. "How do I get to this Land of the Lost?"

"You can't—or at least not alone," said the Christmas Pig. "You're human, and it's a land of Things. That's how it usually works, anyway. But Christmas Eve is a night for miracles and lost causes. If you love DP enough to risk your life, then I'm ready to take you with me into the Land of the Lost, and we'll see whether we can bring him home again."

"I do love him enough," said Jack at once. "I love him enough for anything."

"All right, then," said the Christmas Pig. "I'll help you on one condition. After we've found DP and brought him home, I want you to return me to the girl who bought me."

"Why?" asked Jack.

"Because I like her," said the Christmas Pig. "*She* didn't stamp on me."

The old Matchbox car began to say something, but the Christmas Pig threw him a nasty look and the car fell silent.

"She won't take me back unless she knows you're happy with DP. So, do we have a deal?"

"Deal," said Jack at once. He didn't like the Christmas Pig, but knew that he needed him.

"You should put something on, instead of pajamas," said the Christmas Pig, "and take your slippers."

But Jack wasn't going to be bossed around by the new pig, and in any case, it felt too weird to put his feet in Things that were blinking at him, so he said, "I'm comfy as I am. Now take me to the Land of the Lost."



SHRUNK

The moment he spoke those words, Jack felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. It was as though he was traveling downward, fast, in a lift. At the same time, the bed and the sheets beneath him began to grow so rapidly that he lost sight of the floor. In a panic, he tried to stand up, but he tripped over a wrinkle in the sheet and fell flat on his face.

Several seconds later, Jack realized that the bed hadn't grown at all. He'd shrunk. When he succeeded in standing up again, he saw that the creases in the sheets seemed like giant snowdrifts. It was very scary to think you could shrink like this, just by saying a few words, and Jack was very glad that his duvet didn't seem to have come alive, because it could have smothered him to death if it had wanted to.